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Université Paris Diderot, Paris, France, September 8-10, 2016

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Conference report: 21st SERCIA Conference: Cinema and Seriality in the English-speaking World

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- 1 SERCIA (Société d'Etudes et de Recherche sur le Cinéma Anglophone), a society founded in 1993 to gather researchers in the field of English-speaking cinema, held its 22nd conference in September 2016 at Université Paris Diderot, France. Remarkably organized by Ariane Hudelet, Associate Professor at Université Paris-Diderot, and Anne Crémieux, Associate Professor at Université Paris-Ouest Nanterre, the conference was especially notable for being the first joint conference with the research group GUEST-Normandie, founded in 2013 and dedicated to the study of television series.
- 2 The theme of the conference was Cinema and Seriality. The conference lasted three days and included 17 panels of 3-5 speakers, as well as two keynote speakers: Scott Higgins (Wesleyan University) and Samuel Chambers (Johns Hopkins University). In an era when the serial form seems to have become an increasingly dominant form, both with the popularity of TV series on an international scale and the growing market for franchises and remakes, the conference theme was devised as a way to investigate the contemporary situation, while grounding it in a tradition of seriality already present in film culture. Based on the postulate that cinema and the notion of seriality have always been closely connected, since film is in essence a series of images linked together to form a narrative, one of the conference's endeavors was to stimulate approaches regarding film form and serial narratives to reflect on the links that exist between the different versions of fragmented narratives. If seriality is coherent with cinema, while being the argument that marks it as different from the episodic form associated with TV and now internet streaming, then the conference ultimately needed to address the question: What is cinema? Thus, various panels ranged from defining seriality specifically for each media, negotiating links between different serial media, and

exploring the essential hybridity and permeability of film and television. The historical association of the serial form with certain literary genres, a lot of them considered “lowbrow,” and the proliferation of these genres in the age of audiovisual serials was to be investigated. Consequently, particularly serial-friendly genres were studied in their specificities and their relationship to the fragmented narrative form, including horror, superhero narratives, British literary classics, documentaries and crime fictions. Several speakers included enlightening research on how the times affected the production of serial forms, shaping the works’ structures and the changes observed in the 21st Century in that regard.

- 3 In the first panel, “Transfers and Adaptations [1],” Charles-Antoine Courcoux (Université de Lausanne) analysed the remake of *Psycho* (Gus Van Sant, 1998) in the light of its ambivalent critical reception. Denounced by some as a vain and mercantile project, the film was celebrated by others as an ambitious art project that intelligently criticizes the postmodern productions of that era. According to Courcoux, this schizophrenia is part of the aesthetic goal of Gus Van Sant, who addresses a spectator both naive and knowing. Pierre-Olivier Toulza (Université Paris Diderot) and Fanny Beuré (Université Paris Diderot) studied the presence of the classical musical in contemporary TV series. Using a different corpus, each showed how seriality allows that genre to take its distance from the classical Hollywood formula. For Toulza, many series revisit the subgenre of the backstage comedy (*Glee* [Fox, 2009-2015], *Smash* [CTV, 2012-2013], *Nashville* [ABC, 2012-2017], *Mozart in the Jungle* [Amazon Video, 2014-] ...), but the traditional musical number no longer opens a dramatic interlude in the story; it occupies an essential dramaturgical role instead. Such scenes are now used to write the private history of the characters, recap dramatic events, draw thematic parallel and/or shed light on narrative arcs. For Fanny Beuré, the musical numbers of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (The CW Television Network, 2015-) are incorporated into the diegesis and reflect its dramatic issues by allowing the characters’ expression of feelings, but they also establish an ironic distance from the classical Hollywood model or from the message conveyed by the song lyrics.
- 4 Production was discussed in the panel entitled “Producing Seriality [1].” It included a talk by Hélène Laurichesse (ESAV, Université Toulouse Jean Jaurès) who analyzed contemporary Hollywood transmedia franchises’ exploration of seriality from the perspective of commercial strategies that aim to generate long term consumer loyalty, inviting spectator participation on free online platforms (such as *My Warner*). Paul Kerr (Middlesex University) revisited the Mirisch Company’s various releases to question a consensus in film history that tends to eclipse the 60’s as a period of decay in the production of series. In her examination of the history of Hollywood’s serial modes of storytelling, from remakes to sequels, Kathleen Looock (Freie Universität Berlin) studied the politics of serialization by associating them with the evolution of popular access to cinematic works, concluding that rather than lacking in innovation these works help restore and sustain a cultural relationship with texts.
- 5 Aymeric Pantet (Université Paris Diderot) opened the panel “Serial Action” with a talk about the formal and cultural hybridity of the transnational Netflix series *Lilyhammer* (Netflix, 2012-2014), exploring how the confrontation between American and Norwegian cultures in the show serves to renew both the Hollywood gangster genre and the customary Nordic television codes. In his investigation of what constitutes the essence of an American TV Cop show, John Dean (Université de Versailles) retraced the

matrix of influences (from literary fiction, 1930s to 1950s radio shows, and comics) to reveal how each cop show builds on a growing legacy of sources while remaining inscribed in the contemporary. Sebastien Lefait's (Université Paris 8) talk focused on the use of surveillance technology at the heart of Adam Rifkin's experimental transmedia work, examining the auteur's adaptation of his film *Look* (2007) into a series (Showtime, 2010), and later his series *Reality Show* (Showtime, 2012) into the film *Shooting the Warwicks* (2015). Lefait underlined how Rifkin's playful maneuvering between cinema and television reasserts their relationship, and how each reactivation of the surveillance apparatus highlights continuity in the media's narrative construction of selected images. The panel concluded with Jules Sandeau (Université Bordeaux Montaigne) who explored the resistance of 80's figures of hypermasculinity (in the *Rambo*, *Terminator*, *Rocky*, *Creed* and *Die Hard* films) when confronted to issues specific to seriality, particularly the aging of characters and the persistence of their idealized physicality in a world of cyber technologies.

- 6 In one of two panels devoted to cinema and adaptation, the talks were all centered on the notion of the palimpsest. Sarah Hatchuel (Université du Havre) analyzed the differences between *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990-1991) and *Fire Walk With Me* (David Lynch, 1992) via the motif of the dream. The glamorous iconography of *Twin Peaks*, a model Hollywood fantasy, could be seen as the mental projection of Laura Palmer about the events surrounding her death, the symptom of a trauma and of a denial of reality that the bluntness of the subsequent movie would try to counter. Anne Marie Paquet-Deyris (Université Paris Ouest Nanterre) showed how the mini-series *Mildred Pierce* (HBO, 2011), an adaptation of James M. Cain's novel (1941) and a remake of the Michael Curtiz movie (1947), exacerbates the tragic dimension of the drama and sets it in a less sophisticated reality than that of the movie. *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010-) gave Elizabeth Mullen (Université de Bretagne Occidentale) the occasion to observe the ameliorative evolution of the figure of the redneck in American culture since *Deliverance* (John Boorman, 1972), and its transformation from scary outsider to fashion icon of a nationalist brand. Melvyn Stokes (University College, London) recounted the intertextual story of the representation of Abraham Lincoln in classical films in order to detect the new use of that figure in *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999-2006).
- 7 The first keynote speaker, Scott Higgins (Wesleyan University), focused on the main thesis of his recently published book *Matinee Melodrama: Playing with Formula in the Sound Serial* (Rutgers, 2016). According to Higgins, it is easy for film historians to leave out serials because they are incoherent and made for a juvenile audience. Indeed, whereas feature films aim for closure, large-scale coherence was not a priority with sound serials. Higgins then argued that aesthetic unity is above all a shared convention, but serials took the liberty to temporarily detach themselves from the story if necessary. Quick shootings and low budgets do not suffice to explain it, given that most of the serials were directed by experienced filmmakers. Higgins asserted that the sloppy continuity was, in fact, externally imposed on the narrative structure by commercial imperatives, and the necessity of respecting the five chapter schedule and its imperative formula of regular climax and cliffhangers, in spite of the fact that cheating and/or repetition impaired the serial's unity. Consequently, the notion of classicism is not the right measure to understand both the form and appeal of serial films. More than the pleasure of narration, serials appealed to the kinetic pleasure of action.

- 8 During a panel entitled “Serial Horror 1,” Eric Dufour’s (Université Paris Diderot) talk generated several debates. Dufour challenged the way scholars use the notion of seriality, a notion he finds flimsy when applied to cinema. Using the example of the *Halloween* franchise (1978-2009), Dufour offered to turn back to a mathematical concept, the original use of the term seriality, in order to study the diagrammatic evolution of serials in cinema. Thus, Dufour cited Leibniz, Cassirer and Deleuze to apply to movies the notions of convergent series and divergent series. As for Tifenn Brisset (Université de Grenoble 2), she foregrounded the intertextual phenomena at work in *American Horror Story* (FX, 2011-), while Martial Martin (Université de Reims) presented the TV show *Scream* (Netflix, 2015-) as a coherent and postmodern continuation of Wes Craven’s famous franchise, which continues to question the culture of seriality.
- 9 “Seriality and Transmedia” was the topic of a workshop which began with a talk by Chloé Monasterolo (Université Toulouse Jean-Jaurès) on the topic of diversions and images in the *Hunger Games* franchise (2012-2015), underlining the work’s media-conscious nature and its combined investment of both the serial’s fragmented narrative and contemporary media’s implication of fans. Ilka Brasch (Leibniz University of Hannover) and Felix Brinker (John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies at the Free University of Berlin) offered a team analysis of the opening recap sequences in film adaptations of comics, revealing a continuity in their self-reflexive negotiation with previous versions of the same narrative. The art of fan vidding was introduced by Rudmer Canjels (Independent researcher) with examples from *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-) vids, defining the formal specificities of the practice and exposing its dual purpose both as referential (disclosing or expanding elements of narrative) and as metatextual (about vidding itself). To underline the difference between the film series *The Whistler* (1944-1948) and other popularized radio shows, Frank Krutnik (University of Sussex) exposed the specific emulation of radio aesthetics within the film narration, for example in the crucial use of voiceovers to develop psychological relationships between the tortured protagonist and the criminals, thus setting the show apart from traditional *whodunnits*. He concluded by noting that the series was eventually continued in radio form after the last of the films.
- 10 In the second panel focusing on “Serial Horror,” Gilles Menegaldo (Université de Poitiers) presented a scholarly reading of Hammer Films’ *Frankenstein* franchise (1957-1974) by studying the similarities with the previous Universal film series, specifically regarding tradition, thematic and aesthetic originality, and the underlying intertextuality of the series with other great myths of the fantastic genre. Hélène Machinal (Université de Bretagne Occidentale) and Francisco Ferreira (Université de Poitier) offered to redefine filmic horror and fantasy with a plastic analysis rather than a generic one. Machinal described the representation of horror in the series *Hannibal* (NBC, 2013-2015) as a new form of aesthetics in which the meaning is eclipsed in favor of aesthetization. Ferreira focused on the *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984-2010) franchise and used a figural analysis to identify different figures of visual emergence as examples of a pure plastic experience.
- 11 Guy Barefoot (University of Leicester) opened the panel entitled “Narration and Seriality” with a talk on the film industry’s early resistance to the serial, recounting the promotion of film series like *The Price of Folly* (1918) or the film *The Master of Beasts* (1922) as “Not a serial.” The distrust of incomplete narratives, that deprived customers of narrative closure should they miss the following installment, led to the

standardization of simplified narrative structures for the irregular viewers. Developing the link between seriality and the melodramatic mode, E. Deidre Pribram (Molloy College) reflected on the place of emotionality both in the narrative processes of melodrama and as an aesthetic device. Seriality was then envisaged as a dialectical tension between narration and monstration by Barbara Szczekata (Jagiellonian University), who analyzed films categorized as “Post-plot,” negotiating the place of pure visuality in sagas that publicize special effects over narrative. Dominique Sipièrre (Paris Ouest Nanterre) brought this panel to a close by offering a conceptualization of the “wellbeing” cop show, enduring *whodunnit* series that balance constraints of genre, structure and contemporary reference in order to enable renewal.

- 12 The second keynote speaker, Samuel A. Chambers (Johns Hopkins University), was introduced. A teacher in political theory, his interdisciplinary interests in social issues, feminist and Queer Theory led him to write articles in *Critical Television Studies*, a discipline that he then defined as *alterdisciplinary* in its refusal of sectionality. Insisting on the underappreciated validity of Michel Foucault’s text *Archeology of Knowledge* on the topic of agency and norms, Chambers announced his intention to consider subjectivity and normativity within subject positions of the protagonist’s arc in *The Good Wife* (CBS, 2009-2016), something rendered possible by the very structure of televisual seriality. Following an overview of the debate over antinormativity and Queer Theory, and a critique of Weigman and Wilson’s stance on norms as inclusive averages (in “Queer Theory Without Antinormativity” 2015), Chambers proceeded to analyze the opening and ending scenes of *The Good Wife* to expose how the show uses seriality to play with normativity. Repetition serves both to give power to norms and is also a way to undo them; thus the repetition of the pilot scene at the end highlights the changes that have occurred, and specifically Alicia’s renegotiation of the structural position of the “good wife.” Chambers continued with an analysis of the climax episode featuring the key conflict between the spouses, and revealed how the wife challenges and rejects the normative force behind her husband’s reproaches as well as her subject position. So an understanding of feminist and queer politics in *The Good Wife* relies on the recognition of the differences between anti-norm and antinormativity, Chambers concluded.
- 13 The panel “British Seriality” was opened by SERCIA president Jean-François Baillon (Université Bordeaux Montaigne), with a talk on the film *Simon and Laura* (Muriel Box, 1955, one of the first female directors in British cinema), revealing the metafilmic dimension of the final reunion of the estranged married couple that is echoed in the hybrid reunion of the television and film formats. Focusing on recent adaptations of British classics, Florence Bigo-Renault (Université Paris Diderot) underlined the increased use of a deductive mode of narration, re-encoding romance or bildungsroman novels into detective narratives, a strategy of rewriting known texts to revisit them anew. Nicole Cloarec (Université de Rennes) focused on the drama serial *Shooting the Past* (Stephen Poliakoff, 1999) in which the stillness and motion of pictures are confronted in an introspective narrative that considers the historical links between photography and cinema, considering the relationship between these serial arts and the passage of time.
- 14 As for the “Aesthetics of Seriality” workshop, Elise Harris (University of Chapel Hill) revisited the ambiguity of the word “cinematic” to offer a better understanding of the phrase “quality television.” She thus confronted essentialist theories of cinema (Bazin,

Kracauer) to the temporal experience of television, describing seriality's principle of continuity as an aesthetization of time. In light of this interpretation, Raphaëlle Costa de Beauregard (Université Toulouse Jean-Jaurès), Claire Cornillon (Université Montpellier 3) and Christophe Gelly (Université Blaise Pascal) focused their talks on the discontinuity specific to TV productions. According to Costa de Beauregard, the narration of the family saga *Downton Abbey* (ITV1, 2010-2015) deals with a form of fragmentation that deconstructs linearity by interweaving several "unidirectional narratives" which flesh out distinct temporalities. Thus, the world of *Downton Abbey* is deeply governed by the rules of modern physics, evolution and entropy, and by the rules of quantum theory (and bifurcation). Cornillon in turn identified the chaotic structure of the show *Dollhouse* (FOX, 2009-2010) as an ideological project that allows a metafictional reappropriation of cinematic codes. Gelly's talk concerned the specific treatment of temporality in the British series *Sherlock* (BBC One, 2010-), its anachronisms, its discontinuous structure and its narrative departures, all of which contribute to the shows' unique redefining of the use of seriality.

- 15 Rich in proposals, examples and methodologies, the 22nd SERCIA conference was an opportunity to draw lines of division and reconciliation between seriality in cinema and in television. The transferability of analytic tools from one media to another was a recurrent concern in many talks. Nevertheless, seriality is a complex notion that concerns many media, periods and genres. Among the topics discussed, it appeared that the specificity of seriality in television compared to cinema could be found in the notion of discontinuity, which is more readily accepted by viewers because of the long term narration required by the media, a form that contemporary TV shows, following in the footsteps of illustrious predecessors like *The Prisoner* (ITV, 1967-1968), *Quantum Leap* (NBC, 1989-1993) or *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990-1991) attempt to experiment with.

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AUTHORS

VINCENT SOULADIÉ

Associate Professor in Film Studies/ maître de conférences

Université Toulouse Jean Jaurès

So_vincent@hotmail.fr

CHLOÉ MONASTEROLO

PhD candidate in Film Studies / Doctorante

Université Toulouse Jean Jaurès

chloe.monasterolo@gmail.com